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The Dragon of Within

Meditation, Fear, and Your Three Brains



Freediving is basically snorkeling, except you learn to hold your breath longer and you dive really deep. I got into the sport because I sensed something important

about the effects of water on the human body — and the first time I tried it, I noticed how easily my fear response got triggered by the urge to breathe. Fear likes to present itself as an impenetrable barrier. It tries to convince you that you cannot change. That it's too dangerous to try something new. Naturally, it discourages many people from freediving beyond their first try. Instead of quitting the sport, however, I accepted the challenge. And I'm glad I did.

Every time the urge to breathe kicks in, the entire world around you transforms in an instant. This transformation is subtle, and you have to train yourself to watch for it. Not only watch for it but head it off and keep it from happening. It's all part of the magic of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, something that Navy SEALs refer to as “flipping the switch.” Physiologist Per Scholander called it the “master switch of life.” Gaining control over this master switch is one of the best-guarded secrets of meditation.

I can best explain it through an example.

My friend Carlos and I were freediving around the pilings of Blue Heron Bridge here in South Florida when I unexpectedly swam into a school of jellyfish. At first, I was calm. I had already lowered my heart rate with slow, prolonged exhales at the surface. This allowed me to navigate calmly among the tendrils of stinging cells. These creatures were glittering, ethereal beings, and I marveled at their intense connection — at the complete support they received from the glowing gelatinous medium of ocean water around them. Mother Ocean held them close, and she held me close too. Time stood still, and these creatures and I shared a moment together. Even now, I can't help marveling that they are still down there, immersed in that beautiful, tender state of oneness with the sea, suffused with the radiant mystery of simply being what they are.

This cosmic consciousness did not last long. It was a rather large school of moon jellyfish. They get numerous in winter here, especially around bridges. I swam under most of them and was looking for a route to the surface. You can probably guess what happened to my blissed-out state of mind as the urge to breathe kicked in. The ability to navigate intelligently very quickly shut down as the stress response flared to life. The stress response can instantly change your entire outlook upon life. The world around me was no longer rich with endless, shimmering detail... It was “alien.” The jellyfish were no longer beautiful... They were enemies. The water was no longer soothing and

caressing... It was cold. The Sun was no longer a heavenly companion down in the deep but a place of safety “up there” which I had to reach at all costs. *Must claw my way back to safety!* Needless to say, I got stung on the way to the surface.



From cosmic to coward. How does this sudden shift in consciousness happen? Well, as I revealed in an earlier [article](#) in *Forbidden Realms*, we humans have (at least) two different nervous systems: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. At any given time, one of these two systems predominates.

When you hold your breath underwater, air hunger brings discomfort, and if you're not used to it, that discomfort easily triggers the sympathetic nervous system. The legendary fight-or-flight response. For most people, this is not at all pleasant. Freediving may look like a great idea in [YouTube videos](#), but when we get in the water and discover how easily the fight-or-flight response kicks in, we quickly head back to the warm, dry safety of land, vowing never to return. We experience panic each time the urge to breathe flares up, and this confronts us with something about ourselves we would rather not see.

It confronts us with our inner coward. It is sometimes not pleasant to see what happens to your personality when the sympathetic nervous system gets triggered. If you're not used to it, you end up doing some pretty stupid and selfish things. This is why lifeguards have to undergo special training. Helping a swimmer who believes that he or she is drowning amounts to facing a greedy monster. A scratching, grasping thing that will pull you under in order to save itself. We each have this cowardly beast

inside us, lurking just below the surface, waiting to be triggered. Holding your breath in deep water easily provokes your fear response, and when it flares to life, you've got to be ready for it.

Some people shrink away from this inner coward in shame, hoping never to trigger it into revealing itself again. They seek out a life of comfort and try hard to "think positively." They avoid anything that will irritate them and rouse the monster within. As a result, they avoid all of the forbidden realms, and they fail to truly live.

Others, however, intuitively sense that modernity has made us wimps in the face of fear. They sense that fear is a natural and healthy part of life, presenting us with a golden opportunity. They suspect that they can train the sympathetic nervous system so that it doesn't flare to life so recklessly and hijack their higher brain functions. In short, they learn how to stay cool in a crisis. As you might imagine, the advantages of doing this go much deeper than the ability to hold your breath underwater. A truly positive mindset is not about avoiding your fear triggers. It's about facing them — and having faith that the darkness has gold in it.

Today, I marvel at how so many "positive thinkers" live in a cowardly, freaked-out state of mind much of the time. In Western culture, we glorify the stress response, don't we? We brag about the number of crises we face in a single day. Our busy schedules. The number of texts and phone calls we receive. How tough our lives are. How blameless we are as we face hordes of "bad drivers" or "stupid people." In the workplace, we may even keep score, maintaining a personal list of enemies and allies. In our Facebook posts, we define ourselves politically by the things that offend our honor. This constantly affronted outlook is, of course, not the manner of an enlightened being. Rather the opposite. It represents the persona of a victim. An endlessly wounded animal. And it has become the default mode of operation for the average, "sophisticated" adult. We wear our drama as though it were a badge of courage, and we equate the defensiveness of the fight-or-flight response with the resilience of a hero.

Big mistake. It is utterly disastrous to claim that the stress response gives us strength of character, for it is not the stress response that makes us powerful, resilient, and awe-inspiring. Rather, it is our ability to govern it, and to stay cool in a crisis, that conveys our true power.

How is this so? Stress usually shuts down higher brain functions, and people who learn to *not* freak out in the face of chaos are those who keep their brains fully functional. They retain the ability to think and create and adapt, even when the going gets tough. This kind of calm, cool resilience runs very deep. Deep enough, possibly, to touch upon the essence of life itself.

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”
— Joseph Campbell

The Sleeping Dragon

Greatness resides in deep places. Well, at least the *potential* for greatness, anyway. First, there’s a monster to deal with. In old, medieval maps, uncharted territory was sometimes labeled with “Here there be dragons.” Whenever you venture into a forbidden realm, there’s a dragon to confront. But the dragon does not really keep his lair in that forbidden realm. He lives in you. He’s built into your nervous system.

Take a good, long look at the coward that’s skulking within. Examining him may be a bit difficult because he hides himself pretty well. You might have to provoke him in order to see him. Perhaps you’ve spent your whole life “thinking positively” in order to keep him buried, avoiding anything that might prod fear to the surface. If that’s the case, your inner coward hasn’t been allowed to mature, and he’s little more than an undisciplined, spoiled brat. He drives so much of your behavior, and he remains unacknowledged, ungoverned, and unchallenged. He turns you into an asshole. A bitch. He wants you on top, even if that means clawing your way to the surface and dragging others down in the process. He corrupts honest work, turning it into politics. He turns play into competition. He turns each meal into a greedy binge and each sexual encounter into a powerplay. He sees the world as a rat race, and he creates a rat race out of the world. And this behavior will not serve us well anymore because the world is evolving rapidly into anything *but*.

There are three big mistakes we make in the pursuit of happiness. The first one occurs as we climb the tower of success. It is usually fear that drives us up the stairs of that tower, spurring us to lock the doors behind us and pull up the ladder so that the evil forces of the big, bad world cannot pursue us into our safe luxury penthouse. If we continue to rely on this tower, we are left with the bleak fate of the paranoid, sickly

executive, such as Howard Hughes, shackled to his game — threatened on all sides by scary germs, or threatened from below by all the other rats in the rat race. He stares out of his high-rise window, reveling in his illusion of security and power, and all the while, the fear that's controlling his life gradually cuts him off from the Earth, weakens his heart, and kills him.

What's the antidote to civilizations fear sickness? It's obvious, isn't it? Descend from the tower. Go back down the stairs. Rejoin the Earth and reacquaint yourself with her deep passions and her secret powers. Relax. Spread out into the environment. Instead of tensing up and rising above the world to conquer it, we must learn how to become the world again. For the world is what we are, and our efforts to stand above her and apart from her are driven by fear.

But even as we try to re-unite ourselves with our long-lost Mother Earth and become one with the universe, we run into our second big mistake. There's another escape route that distracts us from happiness. The dragon of fear not only prefers to lair in the lofty pinnacles of skyscrapers. It also cowers deep in the Earth. The dragon's cave is another hiding place that separates us from the natural world. If we're not escaping from life up the stairs of a tower, we are slinking away from it into the depths of a hole in the ground. A cave is a place where a wounded animal retreats to lick its wounds, and the dragons of medieval European myths could, of course, be found in such caves. They were greedy, spiteful beasts, and they could usually be found in a deep, dark place, guarding a pile of golden treasure. They would kill any career-minded adventurer who dared touch their horde. Sometimes they guarded something even more precious than gold: a beautiful, golden-haired virgin. How many clueless super-achievers today still slink into their man caves like greedy lizards to guard these pointless treasures? Not only do they hoard money to obscene levels, but they also fill their lairs with golden trophies. And even their wives, to them, are little more than golden-haired trophy wives.



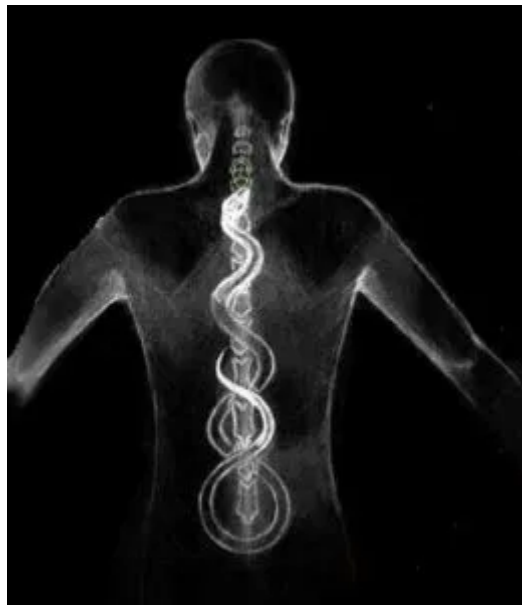
This means, of course, that if you come down from the lofty tower of civilization, you will still have to deal with the fear that drove you up that tower in the first place — and that fear will just as easily send you fleeing downward as up. Your New Age guru may advise you to “go within,” but that’s also a hiding place. And a trap. If you are not careful, you will end up withdrawing into your own personal underworld, hoarding your spiritual wealth there and refusing to be part of the world. To accomplish a true sense of oneness with the universe we must not only descend from our lofty towers but also ferret out the beast from his cave. In meditation, this means that, yes, we delve deeply into the mystery of who and what we really are. But not to stay there to luxuriate on a pile of golden treasure. Rather, we must provoke the beast within, draw him out, tame him, and share our inner treasures with the world. There is work to do.

What? Provoke a sleeping dragon? That’s dangerous. And painful. And most unpleasant. What’s the purpose of doing something like that? Do I ferret out the dragon so that I can slay him?

Well, actually no. That would amount to the third big mistake.

Contrary to what the civilized mind thinks, your path to greatness does not lie in killing your fear. It lies in befriending it. Taming it. Claiming its power as your own. And much to your surprise, you will find that this “dragon of within” wants your love. He *wants* to be tamed.

The evil dragon of medieval myth is not really evil at all. He is the same thing as the *kundalini* serpent of the Eastern yogic traditions. The same thing as the serpent power that is said to lie coiled up and sleeping at the base of the spine. The yogi sits in meditation and descends into the depths of his body to rouse the beast and draw it up into the heights. He tames it and sets it free. Gives it a higher purpose. Unleashes it upon the world. He draws it out of its cave, uncoils it, and coaxes it up the spine, integrating it into every part of his being until eventually it unifies him to the cosmos itself.



Why would a yogi fantasize that there's a snake inside his body? The answer will probably surprise you. You see, fundamentalist Christians are actually right about something. The Eastern practices of meditation and yoga really are a form of Satanic magic.

What! How?

These practices deliberately provoke the dragon of within. For if your “evil” inner serpent (your Satan) remains buried in some kind of dark cave (or Christian underworld), you remain stuck in a state of arrested development. In a state of fear

paralysis, unable to live a richly engaged life because your higher brain functions are inhibited by an overactive fear response. If you demonize your fear and refuse to tame it, you remain controlled by it. It hounds you and secretly manipulates you from the depths of your subconscious. You remain trapped in a coward's life. Afraid not only of bullies but also of even the most minor forms of discomfort. Afraid of heat and cold. Afraid of dirt and germs. Afraid to hold your breath underwater or to sleep in a dark room, or even to feel the press of sunlight on your naked skin. Afraid to push the body beyond its usual limits at the gym and afraid to push the mind beyond old, outdated belief systems in college.

Three Brains

It may be helpful to understand that the dragon of fear keeps his lair inside your head. He is reflected physically in the anatomy of the brain. There are three different brains in your head (at least!), and each brain has its own personality.

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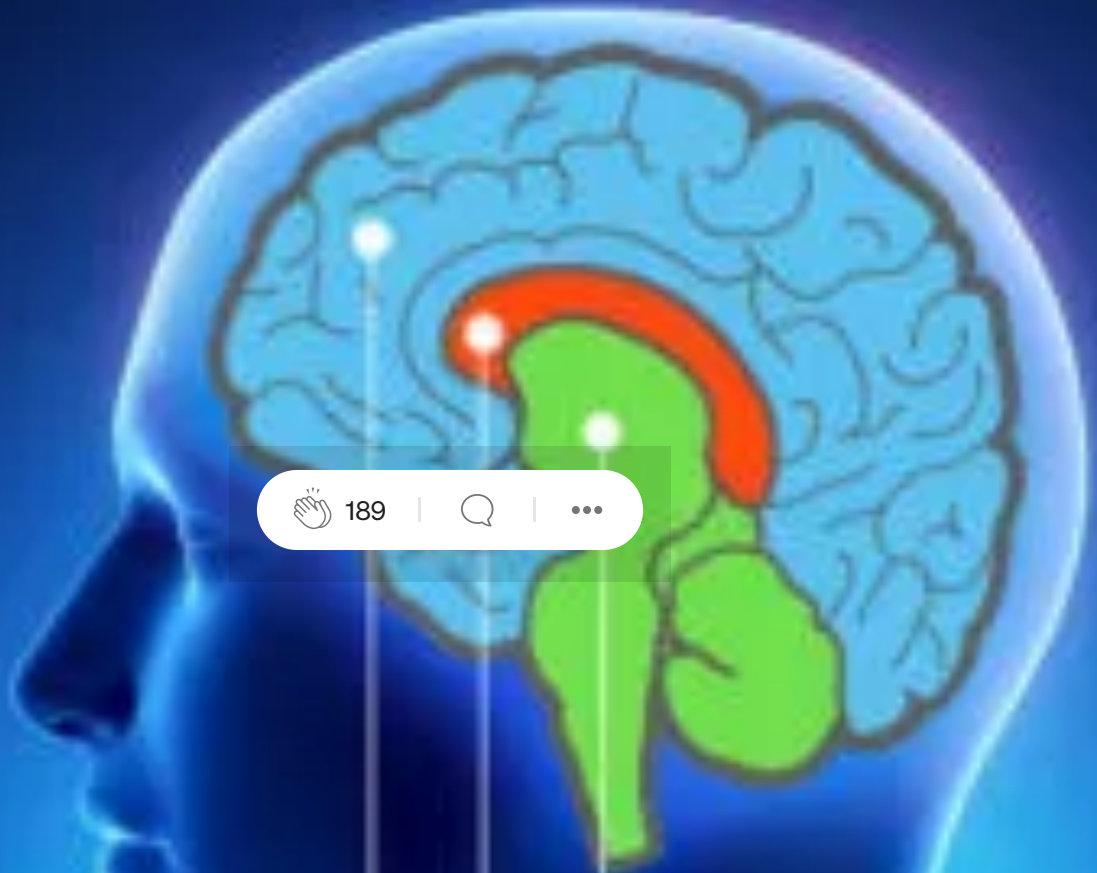


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reptile.

The Three Brains



NEW BRAIN

MIDDLE BRAIN

REPTILIAN BRAIN

The neocortex: The neocortex is also known as the new brain. No one really knows how long ago the neocortex came online, but in the span of the Earth's biological evolution, it is not a long time at all.

The neocortex is the large, well-known noodle-like structure that sits directly beneath the cap of your skull. It exists in all higher mammals, and it is especially well developed in humans. This brain is highly involved in the contemplation of life and the experience of profound joy. It does complex math and marvels at the mysteries of science, art, and literature. It creates the vast and dramatic illusion of linear time so that it can learn from “the past” and plan for “the future.” It sees endless detail and is capable of viewing an issue from multiple perspectives at once. When it is fully functional, it processes overwhelming amounts of data and produces groundbreaking new ideas with very little effort. Not only that, but it is capable of glowing with compassion and gushing with unconditional love.

Sounds wonderful, right? Well, the full potential of this brain is usually compromised. Most humans have trouble keeping it fully operational. It is either shut down by the stress response, damaged by our year-round carbohydrate-rich diet, or heavily conditioned by the stress response to operate in the simpler terms of the more primitive parts of the brain. This compromised state, of course, suppresses enlightenment and causes human suffering.

The mammalian brain: Sixty-six million years ago an asteroid struck the Earth and wiped out almost all the dinosaurs. In the aftermath, mammals survived. Barely. They were probably able to do this because mammals are cooperative. They have a sense of community, and they care for each other when the environment gets tough. The mammalian brain, also known as the middle brain, makes it possible for warmblooded creatures like you and me to have warm feelings for each other. Not only that but to develop social hierarchies, to hunt in packs, and to adapt to change rapidly through social skills and team dynamics. The mammalian brain is the seat of family values, tribal affiliations, and patriotism. Sorry, conservatives, but the religious “family values” of the middle brain are still somewhat primitive compared to the kind of love that humans can experience when the higher brain is fully functional.

Despite its advantage over the more simple brains of the dinosaurs, the mammalian brain is still pretty simple-minded when compared to the neocortex. The mammalian

brain forms grudges. It suffers from paranoia. It burns traumatic events into our memories and haunts us with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). It responds to the world mostly in terms of the four F-words: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and fornicating. When its influence is strong, it can even sabotage the neocortex's ability to produce enlightenment. It can constrain the neocortex into seeing life as one big chess game. It can tempt your higher powers of human reason into subscribing to bizarre and elaborate conspiracy theories. The team-building, cheuvinistic, gun-toting, turf-chalking mammalian brain is easily recognizable in the world of politics. It thinks largely in terms of territory, tribe, and taboo, so it should be no surprise that this part of your brain is what makes all of your forbidden realms forbidden.

The lizard brain: Here we find the cave of your sleeping dragon. Also called the reptilian brain, this is the most primitive part of our skull contents. It is called the lizard brain because all reptiles have brains that resemble this part of the human nervous system. In other words, it is the lowest part of a three-layer system. And beneath the lizard brain lies an even more primitive nervous system, comprised of the spinal cord and the nerve strands that spread throughout the body. There's even a secret, hidden nervous system in your gut, called the enteric nervous system — but that system we will discuss in a future article.

You may notice that lizards are not particularly cuddly as pets. Snakes do not express affection or care for each other in communities. Iguanas do not hunt in packs. The reptilian brain is purely instinctive. Almost robotic. It regulates bodily functions. Like the middle brain, it also responds to the world in terms of the four F-words, but its way of doing so appears more mechanical and less social. Just the basics.

Most importantly, the lizard brain is intimately associated with the cause of human suffering, for as I discussed in a previous article, it is the most primitive functions of a nervous system that make objective thinking possible. Like a killer robot, its ability to sense the environment, and especially to single out targets to destroy and consume, is essential to an animal's ability to feed — not to mention to the ability to run away from predators or seek out a mate. Our ability to simplify the world into predators and prey, into subjects and objects (into me in here and big, bad world out there) — this is what creates the petty drama that we subscribe to when we are living in the rat race. Our super-basic ability to separate ourselves from the world is also the very thing that

convinces us that we are nothing but physical bodies in a harsh physical world. When the reptilian brain has a strong influence in our lives, the neocortex buys into its super-simplified, materialistic way of seeing. Monsters and victims. Subjects and objects. Good and bad. These constructs are interpretations of convenience. They are not reality itself. But the neocortex, as brilliant as it can be, is easily conditioned by the more primitive lizard brain. And of course, by the mammalian brain too.

All three brains, combined, require less energy when they engage in over-simplified black-and-white thinking. This means that our biology is easily tempted into keeping our brains functioning on the level of lizards and rats. Especially when we've had a rough life and the neocortex is heavily conditioned by our stress response. And especially when energy is low — as in when the body's mitochondria are sick from the crappy diet and lifestyle of modernity. Yes, low energy tends to make people easily irritated. It makes us wax conservative. Why does this happen? Well, illness, because it lowers our energy reserves, makes our bodies “conserve” energy. When we are tired we are “conservative.” Instead of thinking in terms of multiple values and multiple perspective, we keep things simple. We lash out. Become temporarily territorial. This is because our illness keeps our stress response revved up, switching off the neocortex, and this keeps higher consciousness beyond our reach.

There's a reason sociopaths (and lawyers) are sometimes referred to as lizards. There's even a conspiracy theory about “the lizard people” — probably because we recognize the brutally efficient behavior of the reptile brain when we see it. Because of their lack of warmth — their lack of mammalian-brain emotions — sociopaths are said to be strongly governed by the lizard brain. Because of some kind of brain damage — or maybe even perhaps because of an evolutionary quirk — they are emotionally stunted. The feelings that arise in the mammalian brain (warmth, affection, morality, and community) are inaccessible to them. Their world is a cold and brutally efficient place characterized by a philosophy of “the survival of the fittest.” Very much like the world of a reptile. Most frighteningly, their neocortexes are unfettered by most of the emotions of the mammalian brain, so they tend to be very intelligent — mainly in terms of manipulating others to ensure their own survival.

Enlightenment: Optimizing the Three Brains

As you can see, our ability to access higher consciousness is reflected in our bodies. You are capable of lighting up your entire nervous system from the base of your spine to the top of your head. And this yogic process of bringing our energy up the spine is reflected in our evolutionary development. Reptiles have evolved from the most basic forms of life, mammals have evolved from reptiles, and humans have evolved into their current state from their mammalian predecessors — and these stages of evolution are reflected in the spinal cord, the brain stem, the limbic system, and the cerebrum. When the whole system is activated, enlightenment ensues.

Because humans have a highly developed neocortex, the potential for the human brain is immense. But as we all know, there seems to be a problem. That potential is often restrained. But why?

The neocortex is expensive. It requires a lot of metabolic energy. In humans, the brain is only 2% of our body weight, but it requires as much as 20% of our blood flow. And that's where the trouble begins. When the body needs energy, it will virtually shut down any functions that tend to use too much of that energy: digestion, the immune system, sexual arousal, and of course, higher thinking. The body's stress response is what accomplishes this shutdown, and when it happens, most of our energy is directed away from the finer things in life — so that we are ready to fight or flee. Most of our ability to think disappears when this happens, and the whole world becomes super-simplified. Whereas before we had the rich processing power of the neocortex, we are left with only a meager level of awareness that sees the whole world in terms of black and white, bad and good, monsters and victims, predators and prey. At best, we still have our familial and tribal feelings available — from our mammalian brain. At worst, we are reduced to the icy cold, cruel efficiency of the lizard singling out his prey.

This all implies, of course, that there's something we can do to take advantage of the brain's anatomy. We can use the more serene personality of the neocortex to monitor the primitive personalities of the lower parts of the nervous system. We can engage with the dragon of fear and refine him. Mature him. And cultivate him to keep him from shutting down higher consciousness. This makes cosmic bliss possible. In the next article, I will reveal three methods for doing this.

Stay tuned!



Meditation Enlightenment Fear Yoga Freediving